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When should German Instruction begin in the Public Schools?

Address delivered by Prof. M. D. Learned before the German Teachers' Association of New York City and accepted by the Association as their recommendation to the Board of Education of New York City.

The question is a practical one and must be discussed from the practical and not purely theoretical point of view. It is perhaps rather a question in all American schools, the colleges not excepted, of what *can* be done, than what, theoretically, *should* be done. This is particularly true of instruction in modern languages, which are, in the estimation of the people, less necessary than many other subjects.

It may be well to begin with a brief historical survey. For about two hundred years German has been taught in this country, both in private and quasi-public schools. These older schools were, for the most part, church or community schools, some of which have survived to our own time in the cities of Philadelphia and Baltimore.

In the place of this older experiment with community schools has been instituted a still more interesting and instructive experiment of teaching German in the public schools themselves. Either separate schools or separate classes or periods have been set apart in the public school system of various cities for exclusive German instruction, the German language being used as the medium of intercourse between teacher and pupil. To be sure, this instruction has now become restricted in the main to the German hours in which the pupil is expected to read, write and speak the German language.

Such schools, called German-English schools, still exist in the city of Baltimore, Md., although not without the opposition of the Anglo-American element, which seems to be gaining ground. In other cities also, notably Cincinnati, Cleveland, Chicago and Milwaukee, German is taught as the language of instruction in all or most of the lower grades of the public schools. The following reports have been received from the Superintendents of the five great German cities of the central West touching German in the elementary grades (reported Jan. 1901):

Cleveland—"German is taught in all classes below the High School and German is the language of instruction." L. H. Jones, Supt.

Cincinnati—"German is taught in all grades below the High School;—one half day the first four years, one hour per day the next four. German is the language absolutely in the German hour." R. G. Boone, Supt.

Chicago—"German is taught in the 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th grades of our Elementary schools, that is in the four years below the High

School. Teachers use the German language in the classes as much as practicable." G. A. Zimmermann, Supt.

Milwaukee—"German is taught in all grades below the High School and as far as circumstances permit, is the medium of communication between teacher and pupil." H. O. R. Siefert, Supt.

St. Louis—"German is not taught in any of the classes in the public schools of the city below the High School." F. L. Soldan, Supt.

It is to be noted that in St. Louis German instruction was dropped from the course of study some fifteen years ago, because of a counter-movement in opposition to German interests. The effect of this nativistic action is noticeable in many departments of German activity in this strongly German city of the West.

It is thus possible in the large German populations of the West, which are centered in cities, to introduce German into the elementary grades and thus continue the use of German already begun in the home; but where the Anglo-American element preponderates, such a procedure is of course difficult and, in most cases, out of the question. This is amply illustrated in the large cities of the Atlantic seaboard, where German is restricted, for the most part, to the High School and is taught more as a key to the literature or as a tool for practical commercial or scientific purposes than for the language itself as a means of intercourse. This is practically the condition of things with which we are confronted in most of our American schools.

THE SOLUTION.

What then can be attempted with a reasonable possibility of success in the way of German instruction in the Elementary schools of America?

Claims of German. At the outset the importance of German instruction should be made clear to the School Boards and to the public. Much harm has been done the cause of German in America by wild and impracticable, not to say impossible, demands on the part of those who base their arguments on sentiment alone. It is but natural that the German should defend his mother tongue on patriotic grounds and that the Anglo-American teacher of German, although not of German extraction, should defend the subject which gives him his bread and butter, but neither of these cases constitutes an argument for sound educational administration.

The *actual* claims of German as an essential element in popular education in America must be clearly understood and concessions must be made by the more radical exponents of the German cause.

It must be recognized that different local conditions require, in the beginning at least, some compromise plan of instruction. It may well be granted that, while German could be introduced at once with advantage in the public schools of our large cities, such as New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and St. Louis, it would be quite impossible to sud-

denly introduce this subject into the curricula of the smaller towns, particularly those where there is a strongly un-German population.

The following may perhaps give a fair statement of the points upon which all may safely agree:

1) That all American public schools should recognize English as the official language of the school and of general instruction.

2) That no foreign language should be taught in the American public schools simply because the pupils and patrons of the school speak the foreign language in question. If this be not recognized we should have not only German schools, but Hungarian, Polish, Italian as well.

3) That only such foreign languages should be introduced as have a general cultural importance or commercial value for Americans.

4) That the selection of a foreign language for the curriculum of the public schools should be so made as to serve the best ends of the greatest number.

5) That either different classes of schools corresponding in a general way to the Realschule and Gymnasium of Germany, or different distribution of classes in the same school allowing differentiation and election, as in the case of the Reformgymnasium, should be recognized in the American schools.

6) That all foreign languages, taught in classes below the High School, should be treated as *living* tongues.

7) That the precedence in the curriculum should be given to that language which the conditions seem to require, whether it be Latin, followed by German, or German followed by Latin or French or Spanish.

8) That of all the modern languages German at the present time deserves the *first* place, both for its cultural and commercial importance.

The cultural claims of German have been making themselves felt for nearly a century and have wrought a complete revolution in American ideas and educational method. Our theology, philosophy, physical science, gymnastics, music, linguistic literature, educational systems and even our polite literature have all felt the touch of German thought and method. The result of this revolution was to place German before all other modern foreign tongues as a cultural discipline in our higher education. The colleges, and the universities all recognize the significance and value of the German language and literature in American education.

A new epoch in this German revolution of American education is now beginning. During the century just passed, the relations of Germany and America have been of a purely cultural nature and the two peoples have been brought into friendly relations by the study of German literature, language and life. The time has now come when the relations of these two countries assume a more seriously practical form. These nations are now recognized rivals in the world of commerce. It thus becomes necessary that the young American should give closer atten-

tion to German Geography, German History, German Letters, German Industry and Commerce. The organization of Commercial Departments in our High Schools will furnish the pupils with an opportunity to prepare for this new era and will demand a more thorough knowledge of the languages of those countries with which we have commercial relations, particularly of the German, and perhaps to a less degree of the Spanish languages.

SPECIAL ARGUMENTS FOR GERMAN IN THE ELEMENTARY GRADES.

Among the reasons for introducing German into the elementary grades are the following:

1). That a foreign language, in order to be learned thoroughly, must be taught as a spoken and written language. The question of method will soon settle itself with the sensible teacher and the abuses connected with the so-called natural method will not need to be considered. It is a well established fact in the experience of the best teachers that language must be taught and learned with systematic reference to rules of construction.

2). That the High Schools and Colleges have not the necessary time to teach both literature and language, and are obliged to neglect the practical acquisition of the living tongue for the literature.

3). That the acquisition of a speaking knowledge of a foreign tongue should begin while the pupil is still plastic and his imitative faculties are most active. These are years of the elementary grades.

4). That instead of being a hindrance, the study of a living foreign tongue serves to quicken the interest and inculcate a precision in the production of English sounds which is highly essential for English speaking pupils in America, particularly those who live outside of New England. This is a long overlooked but most cogent argument.

5). That German, if introduced before Latin (or Greek), would naturally lead the pupil to regard all foreign languages as living forms of speech and thereby give new interest and zest, even to the study of the classics.

The utterly false and perverse and time-wasting method of teaching Latin and Greek as book-languages has not only wasted the energy and time of whole generations of American pupils, but has to a large extent, defeated the ends of their education in the Classics, neither enabling them to read the great classic writers with ease, nor to pronounce them with accuracy, but rather has demoralized Classical study in America.

6). That the grade in which German for example should begin, will depend at first upon the local conditions, but that the language should be introduced into the schools of our large cities early enough below the High School to give the pupils a simple speaking and writing knowledge of German, so that they may continue the advanced study either in the commercial or literary courses of the High School.